

Buddy Volunteering Program

The current scenario

Nothing is permanent. Change is the only constant factor. Our lives, lifestyles, attitudes, customs, traditions, morality, ethos, values, etc., have changed with the passage of time. Joint families have broken down into nuclear families. Even family as a concept is changing.

In developed countries, social security is extended by the governments with contributions made by the people. Independent senior living communities are available. With advancing age, one has the option to move to assisted or memory or continuous care facilities depending upon the need. Medical insurance is well structured and takes care of medical requirements.

In India, senior living communities are still in the evolutionary stage. Senior care facilities are available in limited numbers but are expensive. The 60+ population is more than 138 m today and, is expected to touch 194 m by 2031. This is a 41% rise over a decade and would exponentially grow to 319 m by 2040. Senior citizens would then be close to 18% of the country's population with a very young population of below 35 years constituting almost 65 % of the population. The southern states have a higher percentile of seniors when compared to the rest of the country. These numbers seem staggering for any government to manage. Only 76% of the seniors have at least one child staying with them. Most have their children working in far-off places and are forced to manage their lives in their sunset years all by themselves. 75% of the seniors suffer from one of the other chronic diseases, 40% have some disability and 20% have issues related to mental health.

Senior Living communities

Over the past two decades, retirement communities have sprung up in India. Coimbatore is currently the "*retirement capital*" of India. These retirement communities are not old-age homes that are run by the government or charitable institutions or NGOs. Service providers from the Private sector manage such retirement communities for a charge for basic services like housekeeping, security, medical, and catering. However, less than 2 % of our senior population lives in such organized retirement communities.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, untold misery has been heaped on senior citizens living on their own. They need to take extreme precautions as they are most vulnerable to the infection. Children and grandchildren could not visit them due to travel restrictions and protocols to be followed. The sudden withdrawal of the support system and lack of social togetherness has added to the stress, causing anxiety and depression in many elders. There is an immediate need to create an ecosystem for the seniors, which will help diffuse the stressful situation, reassure, and promote social oneness.

The OurParents initiative

CovaiCare under the leadership of Colonel Achal Sridharan has been able to create senior living communities across South India for the past 18 years. He is the pioneer and the author

of the active life concept for senior citizens in their silver years. Colonel's concepts in senior living and care make seniors realise that being old is not a disease but a natural process of aging. This is the core philosophy of the "**OurParents**" venture started by Prajosh Balakrishnan who with his 9 years of association with CovaiCare is taking the lead in the initiative. The first phase of 'OurParents' is with the retired employees from **Bharath Heavy Electricals Pvt Ltd (BHEL)**, one of the largest state-owned public sector companies networked across India. This model will then be rolled out with other corporates, to reach trusted services and care at the doorstep to every senior citizen across the country.

The pandemic phase has stopped all social activities that promoted bonding amongst family members and friends. Many families have lost their loved ones. *The primary intent of the 'OurParents' initiative is to use telecommunication and online media to re-establish connection and social get-togetherness.* OurParents support team will help connect qualified vendors and resolve any of the senior's requirements. Preventive health checks and various other value-added services are also on offer. *The focus will be to connect resources essential for the elders, thereby simplifying their daily lives as well as promoting group cohesion.*

The Buddy Program

Primarily, a small batch of seniors would be assigned to each university student volunteer. Buddies engage with seniors through informal chats, more so perhaps by listening to what the senior has to say. The interaction may be over some online games, puzzles, sharing recipes, talking about their day, and much more. Where video chat is not possible, buddies can talk to the senior over the phone.

The 'Companion for Seniors – Buddy Program' is executed in collaboration with **StudentsCare, a US-based Non-Profit organization**. They will provide guidelines for the selection and training of student volunteers to equip them with the skills necessary to make social connections. They will monitor the program outreach and have periodic reviews over group discussions to ensure the success of the rollout. There will be a certificate for providing voluntary social service awarded to the students after completion of the term, which would be one year.

The Buddy Program is a mutually beneficial model for the students and seniors. The interaction with their Buddies offers the seniors reassurance and support that is missing. It would help them feel cared for and reduce their anxiety. The Buddy will have the opportunity to serve seniors, who have great wisdom and life experiences to share. The students will learn and benefit from the inter-generational exchange with the seniors. The student volunteers can improve knowledge, and interaction skills, and more importantly, develop empathy to provide compassionate care for each other. They would also have a chance to globally connect with student volunteers involved in the program overseas and learn about their cultural preferences and humanities.

The **certificate provided by Students-Care.org** would also be a good reference to show work participation for a social cause. This could add to their credentials, which they can leverage in their careers for higher studies or employment overseas or in India.

Contact: Phone: +91 9382604235 Email: buddyprogram@ourparents.in
For more details log on to : www.companionforseniors.com/